

Pentecost 11A, Sunday, August 16th, 2020

Readings: Genesis 45:1-15, Psalm 133, Romans 11:1-2a, 39-42, Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

A Place at the Table

Introduction

These past weeks, we have heard stories from the Gospel of Matthew, stories of key events that the early church recalled about Jesus. Last week we heard about the story of Peter momentarily walking on water, the week before of Jesus with the loaves and fish, and today we hear about perhaps the most underrated story of all: Jesus' response to the "Canaanite" woman, as Matthew has it, who shames Jesus into recognizing her equality with the Jews: that she too "has a place at the table"

So, let's begin with the story itself and then move to the thought of a great systematic theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr.

The Story

As a pre-requisite to the reading, it is important to gain a sense of Matthew's concerns. Matthew, a Jewish Christian, addresses himself to his congregation/community, which is largely itself Jewish. The tendency within the congregation was to interpret Christian identity in a way that sat closely with Jewish identity. The tendency was to interpret the religious law strictly in alignment with Jewish codes. Christianity then, in the Matthean community, assumed the characteristics of a conservative Jewish-Christian legalism. Unsurprisingly, something else accompanied such conservative-legalistic views; and that was antipathy toward non-Jews, to Gentiles. These people had little place "at the table".

It is in this context that Matthew addresses his people through the of a story a Canaanite woman, who approaches Jesus. It seems clear that Matthew received the story from the older Gospel of Mark (7:24-30), and then edited it, turning it to his own purposes. So, what is it that stands out in this story of Jesus? What is it that Matthew is wanting to say to his community?

First, *Matthew is shooting across the bows of Judaism, in which he has little confidence, which in turn forces his own Jewish-Christian community to think again about their uncritical acceptance of their Jewish religious tradition.* His sense about this woman, an outsider, is the same as his sense about the incident of the pagan centurion who sees Jesus for who he is, amid the blindness of the religious who don't (Matthew 8:5-13). Here, the least likely to understand Jesus' identity, appears to be closer to the truth than the most likely. This Canaanite woman, this woman who most definitely has no seat at the table, when it comes to the question of orthodoxy, acceptability and salvation, cries out "Son of David", as she begs for her daughter's healing and restoration.

Second...*and this is disturbing... Jesus' response is downright discouraging.* What we hear sits awkwardly, offensively with the Jesus Christ to whom we look for guidance in our lives. In response to her plea, "Help me sir", Jesus replies, "It isn't right to take the children's food

and throw it to the dogs.” Wow! Israel are God’s children, but non-Jews are dogs. Now commentators, have sought to soften the religious racism flowing from Jesus’ mouth. We often hear that the term used for dogs here, really refers to puppies. But this is not a sentimental statement about non-Jews, this is disparaging, this is hostile. But then the woman’s response: “That’s true, sir... but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters’ table.”. Touché. This woman is sharp and courageous, and of course desperate for her daughter. She agrees and then challenges Jesus. On all accounts, Jesus is taken aback, and then forced to rethink his conservative racial prejudice. He says, “O woman, great is your faith. Let what you wish for happen for you.”

What can we conclude? At the beginning, the story is discriminatory, at the end this woman is affirmed, she has a place at the table. Imagine the alarm, the consternation as Matthew makes it clear to his Jewish-Christian community, that non-Jews and non-Jewish Christians, do not enjoy a monopoly on salvation. That the world and God is bigger than them. Even Jesus had to learn. So why don’t they?

Application: H Richard Niebuhr

If there were ever a story that damns religious justifications for inequality, this is it. The story points out, as Simone Weil perceived, that alone, we human beings are unable to actually access the great humanistic values of truth, beauty, liberty and equality. Rather, we need grace to do so, the generosity of God, to enable us. In our story, that grace comes through the robustly intelligent words of the woman, pushing back at Jesus, forcing him to think again, to allow his world to be up-turned. The insight is that the grace of God unapologetically changes injustice.

This idea of God’s grace that wakes us up, that opens our eyes, is something that the North American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, understood so well. Niebuhr taught at Yale Divinity School for many years and was an ethicist by training. For Niebuhr, the idea of the equality of all people, is in the first instance, an assertion about human worth in relation to God. In our relationship with God, as we stand before God, we are endowed equally with dignity. Niebuhr’s point is that this dignity before God is not reducible to our relative social position, money, education, looks or anything else. Indeed, all of this is relativised by the God who is absolute.

And so, he writes;

This idea of equality, which stems from faith in the creator and judge of all people...does not measure people by some common human standard. It affirms, rather, that all people have immediate worth to God, the last measure of value, whatever be their worth or lack of worth to each other or to society. We are to deal with each other as uniquely sacred, and ignore all claims to special sanctity.

We all have a place at the table!